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East Timor: Statement of Concern

We are moved to make this statement in response to the belief in some quarters that the situation in East Timor is settled and should be put behind us.

We cannot accept this assessment while, after ten years, the following questions remain outstanding:

- Why does Indonesia, by its own admission, maintain large numbers of combat troops in the territory?

- What is the explanation for the widespread violations of human rights recently documented by Amnesty International, including disapearances, extra-judicial executions, large-scale detention and torture?

- Why have successive Indonesian offensives failed to overcome the Fretilin-led resistance if, as Indonesia contends, the guerillas are an isolated minority with no support from the population?

- Why, unlike in Indonesia itself, is open access to the territory forbidden to relief and development agencies and to independent observers?

- Why has the Catholic Church in East Timor, in a series of recent statements, asserted that self-determination is the only path to lasting peace?

We raise these matters out of a genuine concern for a courageous but small and relatively defenceless neighbouring people. They point to one unavoidable conclusion: that after ten years the East Timorese people continue to resist integration with Indonesia despite the enormous cost in lives and suffering this resistance has entailed.

The roots of the conflict lie in the East Timorese people's clear knowledge that they, almost alone amongst colonial peoples, have been denied natural justice in the form of their UN recognised right to self-determination. Added to this is their equally clear awareness that their ethnic, cultural and religious identity is being steadily destroyed by the on-going Indonesianisation process which is promoted as development.

The real issue is not the provision of development aid. What is at stake is a people's very identity and the freedom to exercise fundamental rights they have done nothing to forfeit. We are convinced that until the issue is faced up to on this level, the East Timorese will continue to resist, the conflict will continue, and regional relations will continue to be distorted.

In this context we are disturbed by Foreign Minister Mochtar's announcement in March that Indonesia will do everything in its power 'to obliterate East Timor from the UN agenda this year'.

United Nations acquiescence to this would certainly be a gross betrayal of its commitment to the principle of self-determination. More importantly, however, such a UN action would contribute nothing to a solution on the ground in East Timor.

We envisage a more constructive role for the UN. We strongly recommend that the UN and its member states including Australia give full endorsement to the negotiating process started in 1982 and, if necessary, renew the Secretary-General's mandate for this purpose, making it plain that the East Timorese people including the Fretilin-led resistance must be fully involved in the search for a political solution.

We note that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) have made similar appeals in recent times. We strongly encourage other sections of the community to do likewise.

In particular, we urge the forthcoming National Conference of the Australian Labor Party to put the welfare of East Timorese people first by giving strong support to a UN sponsored resolution of the conflict and not to yield to pressure to declare East Timor part of Indonesia.

It is our sincere conviction that this conflict will persist for another decade and beyond unless the basic and legitimate grievances of the East Timorese people are squarely addressed.

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SIGNATORIES TO EAST TIMOR STATEMENT OF CONCERN

Dr Bob Brown
Conservationist

Anne Deveson
Chair of South Australian Film Corporation

Simon Crean
President, ACTU

Peter Garrett
Rock singer and disarmament campaigner

Brian Gore
Priest, former political prisoner in the Philippines

Sir Mark Oliphant
Eminent scientist and former
Governor of South Australia

Patrick White
Author, awarded Nobel Prize for Literature 1973

Judith Wright
Poet, awarded Asan World Prize for Poetry, 1984

Father Francis Bertagnolli
Australian Head, Salesian Order

Sister Barbara Davis
Provincial, Good Shepherd Sisters

ACT

James Dunn
Former Australian Consul in East Timor

Russell Rollason
Executive Director, Australian Council for Overseas Aid

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Peter Mason
Professor of Physics, Macquarie University

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Len Barry
Secretary, Tasmanian Trades and Labour Council

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Founding member of the Australia-East Timor Association

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Hon Jim Cairns
Former Deputy Prime Minister

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Author, winner NSW Premier's Award for Fiction 1985

Tim Winton
Author, winner Miles Franklin award 1984